

Discriminatory remote work scheme improved but onerous work hours and harsh penalties will drive poverty

The need for fair pay for work in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities has finally been acknowledged by the Federal Government but Budget measures outlined for its remote work for the dole scheme fall well-short of realising this in practice.

The Aboriginal Peak Organisations NT (APO NT) and the Human Rights Law Centre cautiously welcomed some changes to the Community Development Program (CDP), but expressed deep concern about the Government's piecemeal approach and its decision to continue with onerous obligations while introducing a harsher penalty system in remote communities.

John Paterson, spokesperson for APO NT, said that for three years Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations have been dealing with the devastation wrought by the Government's program.

"The hard work of APO NT and other Aboriginal organisations and CDP providers has started to pay-off, with the Minister for Indigenous Affairs recognising that paid work with proper entitlements is the key to lifting families out of poverty, stimulating social enterprise and creating meaningful employment opportunities," said Mr Paterson.

Mr Paterson welcomed the announcement of 6000 subsidised jobs with proper work entitlements and improvements to the way that people's work capacity is assessed but said the Government should be adopting the Aboriginal-led model already developed by APO NT.

"We are pleased that there will be subsidies for 6000 jobs and an improved assessment process to ensure vulnerable people are not forced to participate beyond their capabilities. However, the Government has engaged in a cherry-picking exercise rather than wholeheartedly adopting the positive Aboriginal community-driven model developed by APO NT, which will limit the benefits possible on the ground," said Mr Paterson.

The Budget measures include a reduction in work requirements from 25 to 20 hours, but people in remote communities, 83 per cent of whom are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, will still have to work around 270 hours more each year than people in urban areas.

Adrienne Walters, senior lawyer at the Human Rights Law Centre, said that it was mind-boggling that after three years, a racist and inflexible work hours requirement will continue to be imposed on remote communities, albeit in slightly modified form.

"Equal pay for equal work is a core tenet of Australian society. The Federal Government must eliminate the blatantly discriminatory requirement which sees people in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities forced to work more hours for the same basic Centrelink payment as people in cities," said Ms Walters.

Both organisations have also warned that the new compliance measures announced in the Budget will undermine the potential for positive outcomes.

"The inclusion of more onerous compliance measures is likely to drive up poverty and disengagement. The Government's own data indicates that people subject to the remote CDP scheme are already at least 20 times more likely to be financially penalised," said Mr Paterson.

"Unfair financial penalties have already seen parents struggling to put food on the table for their kids. The Government appears satisfied to dump a new harsh one-size-fits-all penalty system on remote communities, but still discriminate against them in terms of work hours," said Ms Walters.

Further information

The Aboriginal Peak Organisations NT has worked with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations to develop an [alternative model for fair work and strong resilient communities](#). The model focuses on waged work, fair participation obligations, access to support services and Aboriginal-led institutional arrangements.

Key aspects of the alternative model that are missing from Minister Scullion's CDP reforms include:

- Flexibility and community governance structures so that jobs and community projects meet the needs of communities and remote employers.
- An approach to participation obligations that allows local organisations to tailor arrangements to their own communities, with a focus on support and incentives, rather than heavy-handed compliance and financial penalties.
- Work activity obligations that are no greater than those that apply to people in the urban Jobactive program.
- 1500 paid jobs with training for people under 25, giving disengaged young people a reason to re-engage and a pathway to future employment.
- An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led agency to manage the scheme instead of the current non-Indigenous led Canberra-based model.
- A reduction in pointless and excessive administration requirements, which is a hallmark of the current program and consumes valuable funding.

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